



**UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY  
REGION 8**

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January 3, 2008

Ref: 8EPR-N

Kelly Buckner  
Bureau of Land Management  
Vernal Field Office RMP Comments  
170 South 500 East  
Vernal, Utah 84078

RE: Supplement to the Draft Resource  
Management Plan (RMP) and Environmental  
Impact Statement (EIS) for the Vernal Field Office  
Planning Area's Non-WSA Lands with Wilderness  
Characteristics CEQ#: 20070403

Dear Mr. Buckner:

Consistent with our responsibilities and authorities under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and §309 of the Clean Air Act (CAA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 7401 et seq., the Region 8 Office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has reviewed the Supplement to the Draft RMP and EIS for the Vernal Field Office Planning Area's Non-Wilderness Study Area Lands with wilderness characteristics. This Supplement analyzes a new alternative, Alternative E, which emphasizes managing all of these lands to preserve and protect their wilderness characteristics.

EPA submitted comments on the Draft RMP/EIS on May 6, 2005 letter, which is enclosed for your reference. As noted in our letter, the Final EIS/RMP will need to assess the cumulative impacts from all reasonably foreseeable development particularly for air quality impacts that could adversely affect visibility in protected areas and to help assure that the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) are maintained, especially for pollutants such as fine particulate matter (known as PM<sub>2.5</sub>) and ozone (O<sub>3</sub>) during these future development conditions. Also, note that the daily PM<sub>2.5</sub> NAAQS was lowered in October, 2006, from 65 µg/m<sup>3</sup> to 35 µg/m<sup>3</sup>. The assessment should reflect this new lowered standard for the 24-hour particulate matter criteria.

In our 2005 letter, EPA noted that the Preferred Alternative could result in approximately 8,000 additional acres of public lands which may become available for oil shale development. This is now the subject of the programmatic Draft EIS for future oil shale and tar sands leasing on public lands which was issued by the Interior Department this month and is currently being reviewed by EPA. In 2005, BLM's Draft RMP/EIS indicated a high to moderate potential for oil

shale development in the next 15 years anticipating one or two small-scale pilot projects. At that time, Oiltech Corporation was running a pilot-scale oil shale project near Bonanza, Utah and Shell Oil Company was conducting a pilot-scale oil shale operation near Meeker, Colorado. We suggested in 2005 that the potential impacts to regional air quality from these projects be evaluated in the Final EIS based on the emissions information available from these two pilot scale operations. Since that time, several additional proposed oil shale and tar sand pilot projects have been proposed on state-owned school trust lands within the Vernal planning area, including two surface retorting proposals for oil shale recovery: 1) Red Leaf Resources located north of Bonanza, and, 2) Millennium Synfuels, LLC (formerly Oiltech Corp.) located approximately five miles east of Bonanza. In addition, there is a proposed tar sands recovery pilot project under consideration by Nevta/Black Sands Holding Company near the community of White Rocks north of Roosevelt. (We note that the proposed pilot project by the Oil Shale Exploration Company at the former U-a Tract has been the subject of two EAs by BLM and as a result the air emissions from this project have been included in BLM's air quality analysis for the basin.) EPA will need to coordinate the air quality analysis of the direct and cumulative impacts of these additional oil shale and tar sand projects with the Vernal Field Office. We also suggest that BLM consider including these additional oil shale and tar sands projects in your ongoing air quality analysis currently under development.

Alternative E is a new alternative similar to Alternative C that was developed for the RMP Draft EIS which would add protective management prescriptions for 277,596 acres of non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics in 25 areas. This would include closing these areas to mineral leasing and off-highway vehicles, excluding rights-of-way, and protecting undisturbed landscapes and opportunities for primitive and semi-primitive recreation opportunities. We believe BLM should implement these management prescriptions for some of the ACECs located within non-WSA lands with wilderness characteristics in order to enhance protection of native vegetation, cultural, paleontological, and historic resources, scenic and ecological values, wildlife, and especially the rare and important riparian and stream-side resources in some of these ACECs. Specifically, this level of protection is needed in areas where significant environmental impacts are occurring or are likely to occur from oil and gas development and off-highway vehicle use. These areas include the lower Nine Mile Canyon and Desolation Canyon (which would complement adjacent protection for the upper Nine Mile Canyon ACEC currently under consideration in the Price RMP Supplemental Draft EIS), Lower Bitter Creek and Bitter Creek, PR Spring, Four Mile Wash, Middle and Lower Green River, White River, and the Pariette wetlands ACECs. Non-WSAs with wilderness characteristics along the southern edge of the Book Cliffs (Rat Hole, Cripple Cowboy, Sweet Water, Hideout Canyon, Mexico Point and Wolf Point) deserve particular consideration for additional protection since these ecosystems are under represented in WSAs and such management would be consistent with similar protections afforded by the Uintah and Ouray Nation within their adjacent Hill Creek extension area.

We also believe these management prescriptions can complement protection of 216 miles of suitable river segments for possible wild, scenic, and recreational designation. These segments include the White, Green, Bitter Creek, Argyle Creek, and Nine Mile Creek. These prescriptions are particularly important for restoring and protecting valuable riparian systems and wetlands along these segments that are: 1) not in proper functioning condition for range

management; or are 2) particularly vulnerable to adverse impacts due to steeper slopes that are subject to excessive erosion or contain saline soils. The additional protections that would be afforded by implementing Alternative E would not substantially reduce mineral development opportunities since just one percent less acreage would be available for mineral leasing compared to the Alternative D – the No Action Alternative. (SDEIS at page 4-10.)

EPA has a responsibility to independently evaluate the potential environmental impacts associated with this Draft RMP/EIS, including this Supplemental Information. As we concluded in our May 6, 2005 letter, we are rating this Proposed Action and Preferred Alternative A as “EC-2” under EPA’s rating criteria which are enclosed. The “EC” rating means that our review identified several environmental impacts that should be avoided to fully protect the environment (Environmental Concerns, or “EC”). As previously stated, the EC rating is based on EPA’s concerns regarding the potential impacts to aquatic resources, water quality, air quality, sensitive/rare wildlife, soil erosion, recreational resources and experiences, and wildlife habitats.

The “2” rating means that the Draft RMP/EIS has insufficient information to thoroughly assess environmental impacts. Quantitative estimates of future conditions, or relative differences in qualitative estimates of those conditions showing change over time would be helpful to understand the impacts to air quality, wildlife habitats, vegetation, water quality, and other environmental resources. Because fine particulate matter in the Vernal area could approach the or exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for particulate matter smaller than 2.5 microns (PM<sub>2.5</sub>), additional information on fine particulate matter conditions should be provided in the Final RMP/EIS. If you would like to discuss these comments, or any other issues related to our review of the Draft RMP/EIS, please contact Weston Wilson at 303-312-6562, or by email at [wilson.wes@epa.gov](mailto:wilson.wes@epa.gov).

Sincerely,

*original signed by:*

Larry Svoboda  
Director, NEPA Program  
Office of Ecosystems Protection and Remediation

Enclosures

cc: Laura Romin, FWS, Salt Lake City  
Gilbert Hunt, Utah DNR, Salt Lake City  
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